

LEAP Online #theboltonway #theboltondifference

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Background

LEAP Online is an online skills portal designed to support students on their university journey, both academically and from a personal development perspective. It was launched in September 2017 and is based on a new Learning Development Framework (LDF) developed by the Director of Student Life and the eResources Librarian. The LDF represents a new learning development strategy aiming to ensure that the University's skills offering is comprehensive and co-ordinated. It demonstrates a holistic approach, recognising four key areas relating to the acquisition of skills, knowledge and experience: academic development; personal development; digital literacy and student engagement. The framework was informed by contributions from Academic Staff, Careers, Student Experience and the Students Union.

LEAP Online contains a series of learning development modules that can be completed by students as a stand-alone activity or delivered as part of the mainstream curriculum. The project team included Mary Barden (eResources Librarian), Dawn Grundy (Faculty Librarian) and Graeme Prescott (eLearning Trainer) working closely with Emily McIntosh (Director of Student Life) who has strategic responsibility for championing student learning development across the institution.

When redesigning the resource and rebranding a new platform, the team undertook consultation with several key stakeholders. These included Graduate Interns based at the University, current students, and academic and professional support services staff.

The crucial aspects of the re-design included- presentation of the information in a dynamic and engaging way (limited scrolling) and the incorporation of badged assessments for students to measure their understanding of the topic.

Development Period

Design

The project group started to investigate the redesign by looking at other products on the market. Criteria were established to ensure quality and consistency: LO learning content was to be openly accessible under a Creative Commons license with seamless Moodle (VLE) integration and the development of badged assessments to capture completed activity.

Typical page layout on a topic contains:

- an introduction- PowToon (animation)
- printable handout of the PowToon animation
- activity – for the majority of sections
- assessment – to measure understanding of the topic
- links to other related content

Curriculum Level

Primarily aimed at undergraduates, LO contains content aimed at different levels of experience and ability (L1, L2 and L3). The levels are colour coded and visually signposted (LO level graphic). Levels increase in complexity and depth to meet the requirements of the curriculum. Levels of learning and skill acquisition are mapped to HE levels (L1 HE4/Foundation, L2 HE5, L3 HE6).

Feedback from stakeholders highlighted that users wanted visual content, we decided to use PowToon for the delivery of information. Our focus groups stated users engaged better with this style of information rather than with text heavy web pages. A key part of the process was to design the activities to accompany the introduction in PowToon. We used Articulate Storyline, an industry standard content authoring tool. Articulate Storyline is interactive, mobile compliant and offers functionality such as drag and drop to build different styles of activities. Delivering information in a bite-sized and flexible way was something which we knew would really appeal to our student community. Many of our students have busy lives and need something flexible, which they can use to support and enhance the taught sessions at University. Thus, consolidating and complementing the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

Launch & Engagement

LEAP Online was launched in September 2017. Staff engaged very well in the launch event held at the university and collaboration between Library and Student Experience meant students received promotional items such as LEAP Online Wall Planners and drinks coasters in their welcome packs. We raised awareness of the resource by including LEAP Online in welcome and induction sessions. Staff training ensured that colleagues were able to familiarise themselves with the platform and able to signpost students and colleagues to the content.

Academic endorsement was key! We found that LEAP Online soon became embedded in the curriculum and used in a variety of ways. Many students completed LEAP Online activities in the classroom, supported and guided by tutors. Students were also encouraged to complete LEAP modules outside of timetabled classes via the piloting of LEAP Action Plans. We also received requests for specific content from academics, e.g. Referencing trouble shooting. In the creation of this additional support we used examples (anonymised) from real essays provided from members of the Nursing team at Bolton.

LEAP Online is part of a connected approach to student retention and success, underpinned by the Early Intervention and Transitional Support (EI) Model. The EI approach ensures that, from the earliest stage, students are supported to embrace a variety of learning experiences and encouraged to work alongside their academic tutors to develop as autonomous and independent learners. As such, engagement with the Student Experience team meant that there was a continuous dialogue about the development of the portal and promotion of the resources across the university.

As a result, we realised that LEAP Online wasn't only viewed as a library resource, it is regarded as a platform to bring together curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular student learning development opportunities and to provide appropriate information, advice and guidance to students in navigating learning content. We found the resource gained interest from within the Off Campus Division, particularly with our overseas partners. One thing to bear in mind is that different models of franchise give us new challenges, as to be fully compliant with using LO users need to access our VLE which not all partners do.

In terms of keeping up the momentum post-launch, Subject Librarians were tasked with promoting the resource on a regular basis in fora such as the university's teaching and learning conference, the STEP Staff Training programme and the staff-student liaison committees.

Other support services, such as Careers, saw it as an established platform and created content for the modules. Professional support teams who collaborated with us to create the content were also proactive in recommending the resource. New sections were designed and launched post-September 2017 and were advertised to staff and students via social media and other communication channels.

There were also some surprising successes, we reviewed data of which schools and programmes were earning the most badges and it became a little competitive when we shared that information! Programme leaders also asked us for data analytics around badges. Students were also keen to know themselves whether they had completed everything. We recognise that the badged assessment data must be treated with caution – it can certainly tell us about high-level engagement (i.e. completion of the modules) and about which topics are the most and least popular with students but further work must be completed in order to assess specific impact on students' learning behaviour, learning habits and skills acquisition. Impact and evaluation of LEAP Online is something we would like to explore further in the future. One example of how we used the data was getting students with high engagement with LEAP Online (our unofficial champions) to take part in a promotional video.

The journey over the course of the academic year has been fast paced and thrilling, much like a rollercoaster ride. However, we have enjoyed hearing about how students and staff have used the platform. The LEAP Project has encouraged us, as practitioners, to develop new skills and insights.

In April 2018 we were delighted to be recognised as the winners of the LILAC Digital Literacy Award. This led to greater recognition within The University of Bolton and amongst learning developers and information literacy professionals in the wider community such as LDHEN, JISC, ALT.

Sharing of Experience and Journey

We've regularly shared our experience of developing and championing LEAP Online within our communities of practice. Examples of these include NoWAL, Clinical Librarians Trainers Meeting, Northern Collaboration Conference, Exploring Academic Skills Conference and Enhancing Learning & Teaching in Management Education (Teach Meet). Currently in the pipeline is an article for London Met #Take 5 Blog – LO development and implementation and a Journal article – The LEAP Framework: A Model for Student Learning Development in HE.

So what's next?

The platform is firmly embedded within the mainstream delivery of study skills and scholarship modules at the university and there is opportunity and appetite to develop further levels and new topic areas. The focus for this year will be collaboration to develop additional levels of content, to support the Off Campus Division and to expand content to HE6+. Academic colleagues have expressed interest in developing subject specific resources and even student created content. The potential for further development is exciting and given the resources to achieve it, we look forward to going even further in supporting our students to get the most out of their time at university.

Bibliography/References

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